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Editorials and Opinion

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Threatening The Arts

The arts have again come under attack. And once more, the barbarians are at the gates.

After organized protests by groups such as the Christian Coalition and the Christian Action Network, as well as rabble-rousing by conservative talk show hosts, the budget of the National Endowment for the Arts is under assault. Cutting that budget would not only endanger local arts events, but would also signal to us all a perilous change in public policy.

The latest NEA brouhaha was caused by a March 5 event at the Walker Art Center in Minneapolis. Ron Athey, a gay man and former heroin user with the HIV virus, pierced himself with needles onstage, in a performance entitled "Excerpted Rites Transformation." After blotting paper towels with his own blood, he suspended them on a clothesline over the audience.

The average person's idea of art? Certainly not. But should the entire NEA be judged by the actions of a man who received only \$150 in government funds?

Of the 100,000 grants given out by the NEA since its inception in 1965, only about 25 have proved controversial. That's hardly reason to punish the entire NEA — and all the worthwhile projects it helps to create.

The majority of NEA grants go to help fund local arts events such as the ones we enjoy in central Vermont. Anyone who has seen one of the Onion River Arts Council's Celebration Series events at the Barre Opera House or enjoyed the performers at the just-concluded Midsummer Festival of the Arts in Montpelier should understand the importance of public support for the arts.

Faced with the furor over the Athey performance, both the House and the Senate appropriations committees voted to cut the NEA budget by 5 percent. However, the proposed Senate cut is more insidious because it targets the hand that reaches out to artists. In cutting 40 percent of the NEA's Presenting and Commissioning Program, 42 percent of its theater budget, and 41.7 of its visual arts budget, the Senate is clearly trying to maim the NEA's ability to support art that's new and different.

Although few people want to see bleeding on stage presented as art, no one is forced to attend such an arts event. And the fact is that our culture suffers from exposure to too few controversial ideas and images, not too many. Increasing Americans' artistic and cultural vocabulary is a valuable goal, even if it can prove distressing at times.

Those self-appointed guardians of popular taste who want the NEA budget cut — or eliminated altogether — argue that we should let the free market determine which arts will thrive. But anyone who believes the marketplace will inevitably nurture the arts should consider how our consumer culture has helped shape the vast wasteland we call network television.

Part of the reason for the lamentable state of the arts in our culture is that Americans devote so little public funding to it — only 65 cents per capita for the entire NEA budget. Looking at what other countries — such as those of Europe — spend to subsidize the arts, and it's not hard to see that the citizens of those nations hold the arts in high esteem.

The Interior Appropriations Bill, which contains the NEA funding, is scheduled for congressional action, probably early next week. Sen. Patrick Leahy, D-Vt., has already spoken out against the proposed NEA cuts.

Perhaps our elected officials should know how strongly we feel about the danger to our local arts community. Call Leahy (202) 224-4242. Sen. James Jeffords, R-Vt., (202) 224-5141 or Rep. Bernie Sanders, I-Vt., (202) 225-4115. Let your voice be heard.